

AUTOGRAPHY



**STEPHEN
THOMAS
COLE**

AUTOGRAPHY

Photography, from the Greek photos (light) and graphos (drawing), meaning drawing with light

Autism, from the Greek autos (the self) and ismos (a state), meaning a state of self

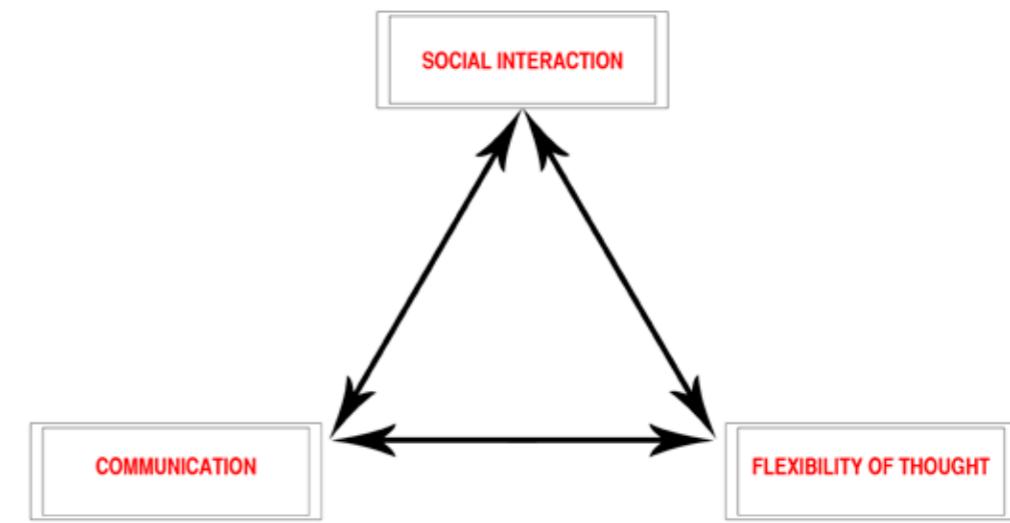
Combine autism with photography for AUTOGRAPHY, meaning DRAWING WITH THE SELF



NOTES ON AUTISM

AUTISM is a lifelong developmental disability and is part of the autism spectrum. Individuals with autism are each affected in different ways. Whilst some towards the higher functioning end of the spectrum may be able to live largely untroubled by the condition, others will be profoundly disabled and will require a lifetime of support. In between these two extremes live many tens of thousands of people with autism as a shared condition but with wildly differing experiences.

However, individuals on the autism spectrum do have three common traits, difficulty in three defined areas. Namely; social interaction, social communication and flexibility of thought (social imagination). This is known as the Triad of Impairment and is used as a diagnostic tool when identifying autism. Even within this commonality, the spectrum nature of the condition dictates that individuals will be deficient in differing ways in each area of the triad; for example, an individual may interact well socially but be non-verbal whilst another may talk freely but in a socially unacceptable way.



NOTES ON PHOTOGRAPHY



PHOTOGRAPHY is, at its core, a tool of human expression in the way of poetry, song and folk stories.

We build narratives and lore, exchange units of cultural currency through photography in a pattern of behaviour that can be traced back to the cave art of the earliest peoples of our species.

Through image-making we are able to transcend language barriers and cultural divides to find a common form of communication.

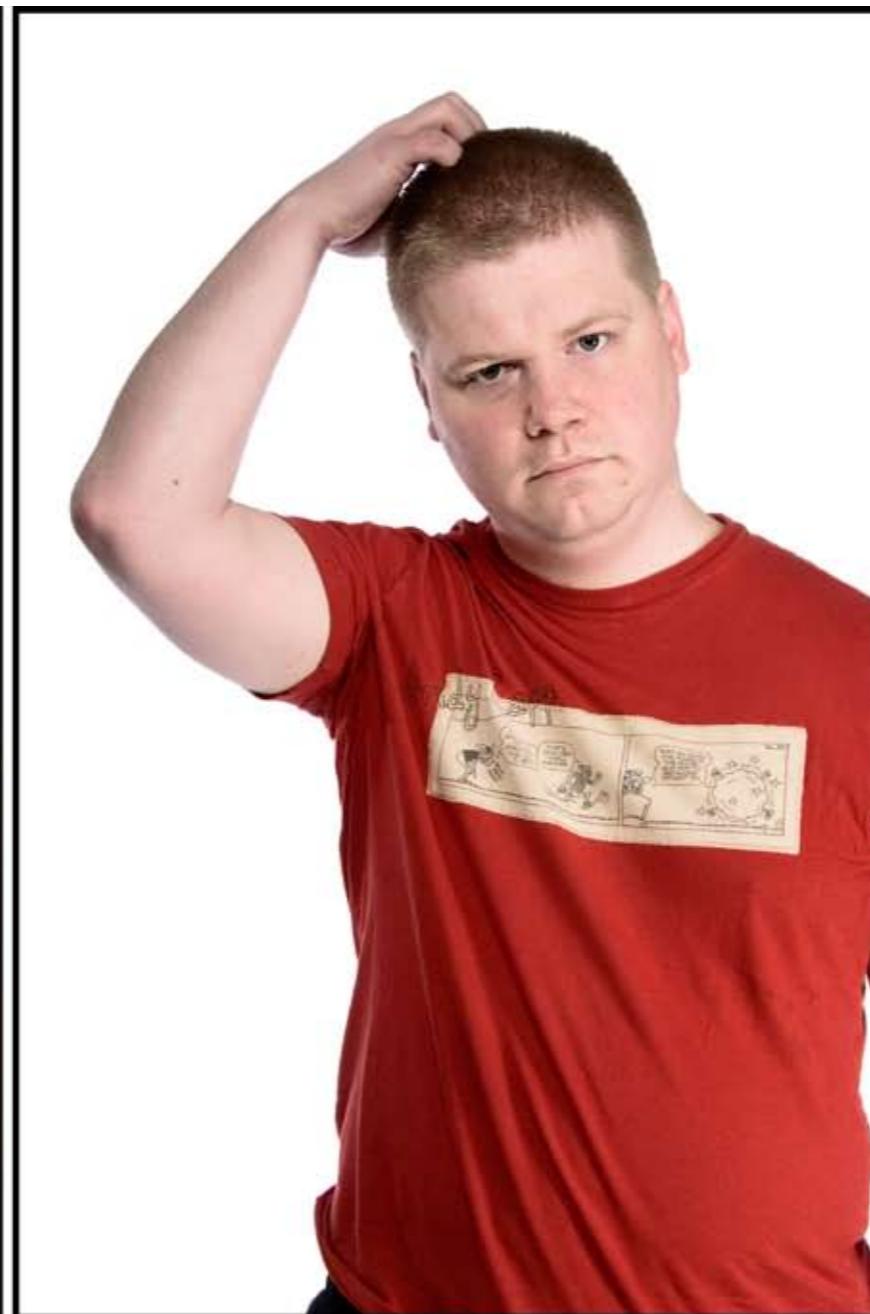
But what of those for whom there are further barriers to communication beyond language? For those who are unable to relate to the shared experience of those around them? If they are unable to communicate verbally, could a visual approach provide them with the tools they need?

In the beginning...

I have known autism all of my life, my brother Michael having been diagnosed as autistic at a young age. I have seen through him the challenges and prejudices that a person with autism faces daily and the lifelong struggle that such a person faces in trying to live in a world and society that they truly cannot comprehend.

In 2008 I started to work on a photographic project with a group of adults with autism whom I had known for a number of years previous, both through Michael's interaction with them at their day-service centre and later through my part-time work as a carer for them at the Kent Autistic Trust.

The project was put together as a self-contained one shot day of portraiture with the intention to cast an eye on these people as individuals in a way that society rarely, if ever, did. These people were invisible within society, bound by their condition to be always on the outside looking in, never able to "fit". Using portraiture to look at the individuals behind the blanket of autism, I hoped to turn the status quo on its head and allow those on the inside of society, even if only briefly, to look outside and gain a greater understanding.



After a very enthusiastic response from the participants, who by and large enjoyed immensely performing for the lens and seeing their image presented on the computer screen, this was followed up with a more thoughtful approach, one that would not only attempt to go beyond the simple representation of a group of people but one that would further recognise these people for who they are and attempt to allow them to express themselves in a more personal manner.

Autism affects communication ability, interaction with society and the ability to be able to easily use flexible thought. Flexibility of thought is a notion that can more straightforwardly be described as "imagination". A person with autism struggles to think "imaginatively", be it regarding a change in daily routine (often a great cause of stress) or expanding their taste in culture beyond one television show, say, or one pop group in particular (the same cartoons watched repeatedly, obsessively even, over years and years).

Using the immediacy of digital photography and the infinite possibilities provided by digital composite techniques, I laid out a strategy whereby I would try to speak to the person through their autism, by taking advantage of their inflexible interests, their "obsessions" if you will, focussing on the subjects that interest them the most. We would then transform their own image into a constituent part of the story before their very eyes, creating a fantasy montage and challenging them to imagine themselves in new worlds.

The results of this experiment were astonishing. For a group of people that the medical orthodoxy dictates cannot think in an imaginative way, the fantasies articulated, both wild and mundane, and the sheer joy expressed in the making of them were evidence of nothing short of a fundamental shift in understanding of the autistic mind.

Emboldened by the success of the exploratory sessions of this new approach, I arranged a much longer-term project, working with 3 autistic gentlemen in weekly sessions, to not only put my theory to a greater test but to also explore how this process could be helpful to a person with autism.

If, as I suspected, the mechanical process I had devised provided a new way for these people to more easily process imaginative thought, then perhaps it could be used as a therapeutic action to encourage these behaviours in the person's wider life, maybe providing some small relief from their autism and allowing them to, in the future, live happier.



The Method

As already alluded to, digital composite forms the bedrock of this image-making process. The very idea of taking an autistic person's image and asking that person to change it into something else is a direct challenge to that which we think we understand about autism as a condition.

The key, though, is to incorporate this change into an image that will stimulate the candidate's thought process. Daren, for example, greatly enjoys drinking beer at the pub. So a conversation starts between him and I around this subject, bouncing ideas and tales off of each other until we start to form an idea, ending this time in the decision to place him in a giant pint of lager.

The next stage, then, is to find a suitable image to build this fantasy upon. Once found, we talk about the performance that Daren must give before the camera to allow this image to be constructed, and here begins the real work as Daren must take the fantasy that we have built together in his mind and abstractly construct it in my studio. Once this is achieved, we then pull together the final image and an internal world becomes externalised.

IDEA - PERFORMANCE - COMPOSITE





Once this process is complete, a new image has been produced, a representation of a fantasy world. Once in hardcopy, this fantasy can then be revisited by the autistic creator instantly by looking, allowing the richness of the imaginative process to overcome the in-built difficulties that they would otherwise have in forming such flights of fancy. The object itself, as well as the process of making, becomes a tool to facilitate wider cognitive function.

We repeated this process many times over, building many fantasy worlds and bringing forth a great many wild ideas and expressions of aspiration. We remained true to the core theory in generating an idea based on a personal interest, then capturing a performance to suit the found image/backdrop and then creating the fantasy through composite. Each time was a joy for us all.

So, that which now follows serves as both a journal of our experiences and hopefully also as a roadmap for future development of the concept.

For me, the images created in these sessions ask profound questions about the nature of photographic image-making, the effect on a person an image can have and the encoding of deeply personal narrative. That the narrative thus encoded is constructed by an autistic mind, the end result is almost an anti-vernacular, a representation of a thought process essentially impenetrable to those without autism but a representation that we can all observe and share in and recognise in degrees. What shines through the brightest, however, is the fundamental human capacity for exploration and joy.

The images within are presented as finished pieces and may be considered as "outsider art" perhaps, but for me the greater representation that they make is of process and action, of expression and thought and, ultimately, of great hope.





THE AUTOGRAPHY SESSIONS

Weekly workshops with 3 adults with autism

August 2010 to November 2011

Daren





David





Nathan



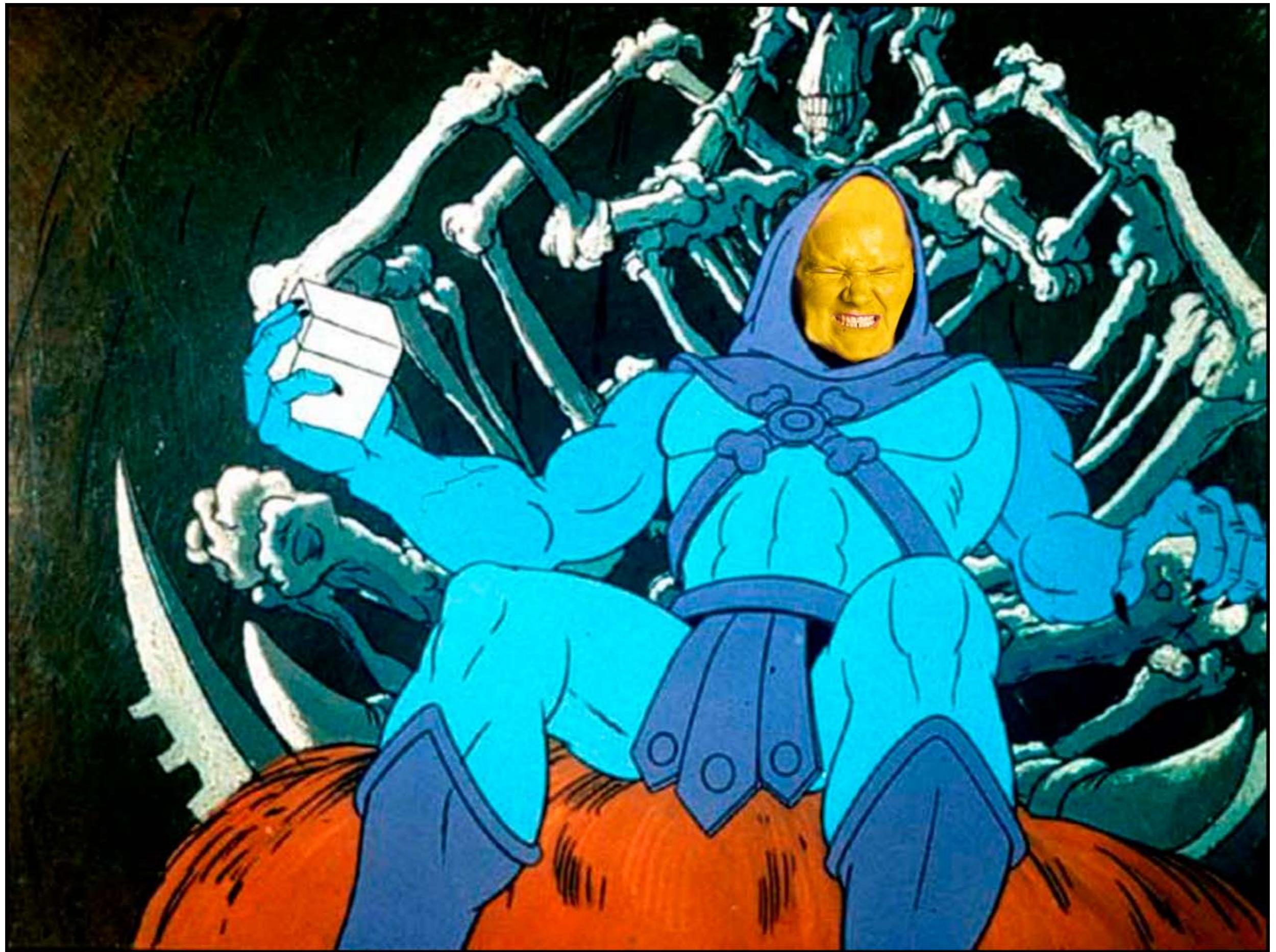


New methods of expression are quickly used to explore the previously impossible.





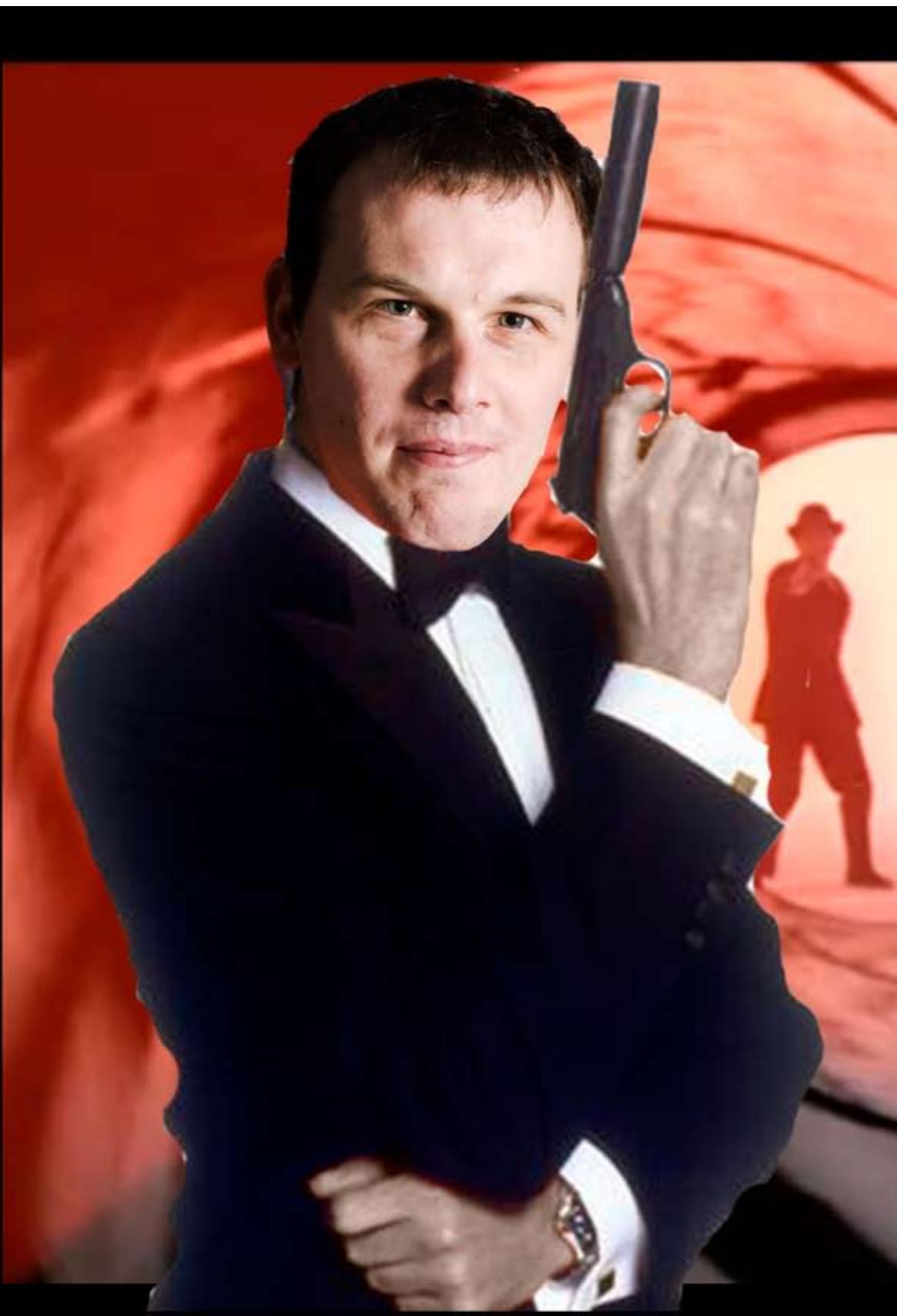




Sometimes one image makes more sense than others...







NATH BOND



007™

Cautionary tales abound!





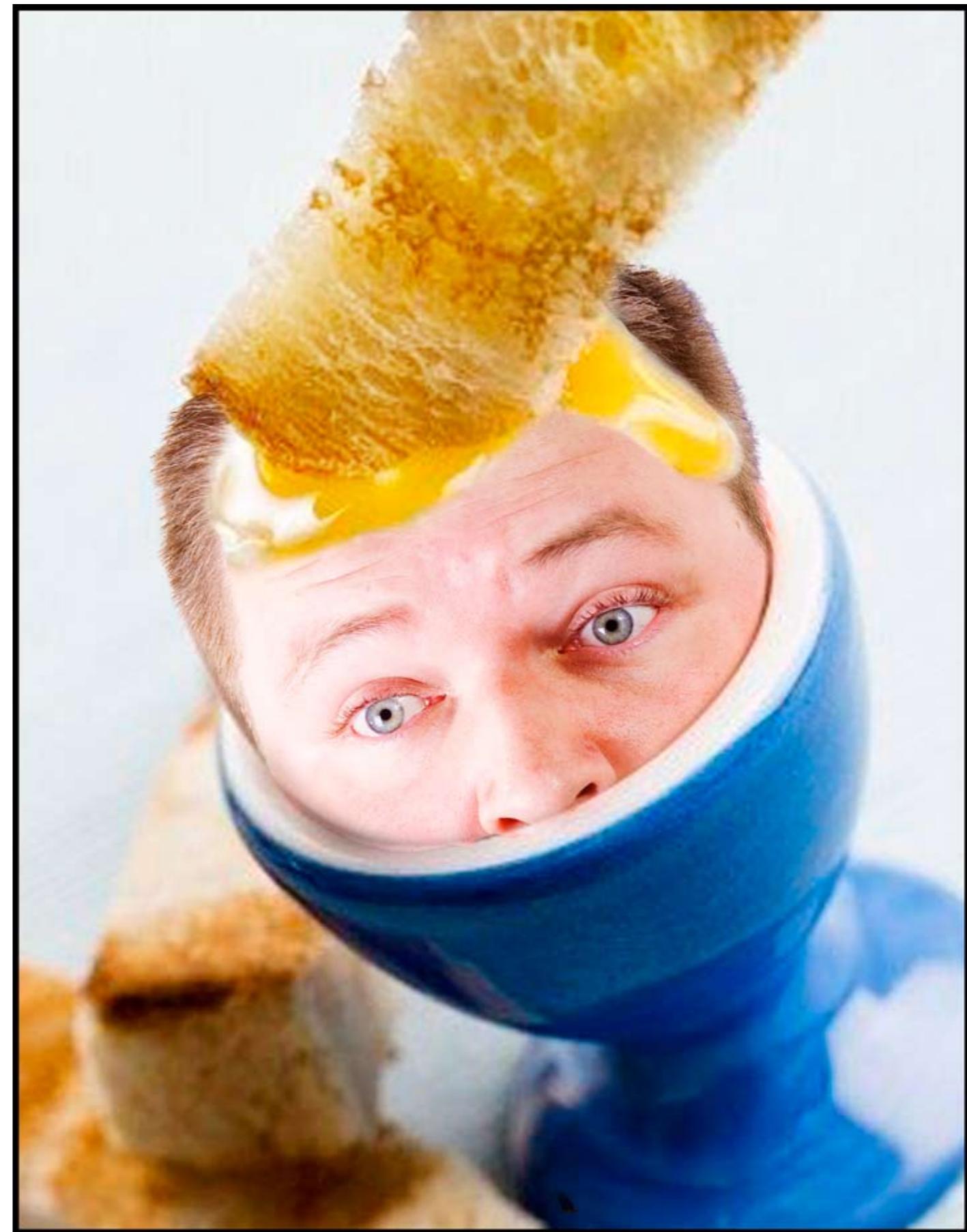
As do aspirational ideas.



If a joke's funny once...



...it'll be funny three times.



A lifetime of disadvantage can be quickly countered.



“Can you put me into a tyre?”





Who doesn't get a kick out of pretending they're in the movies?

David Whibley

DROP DEAD DAVE

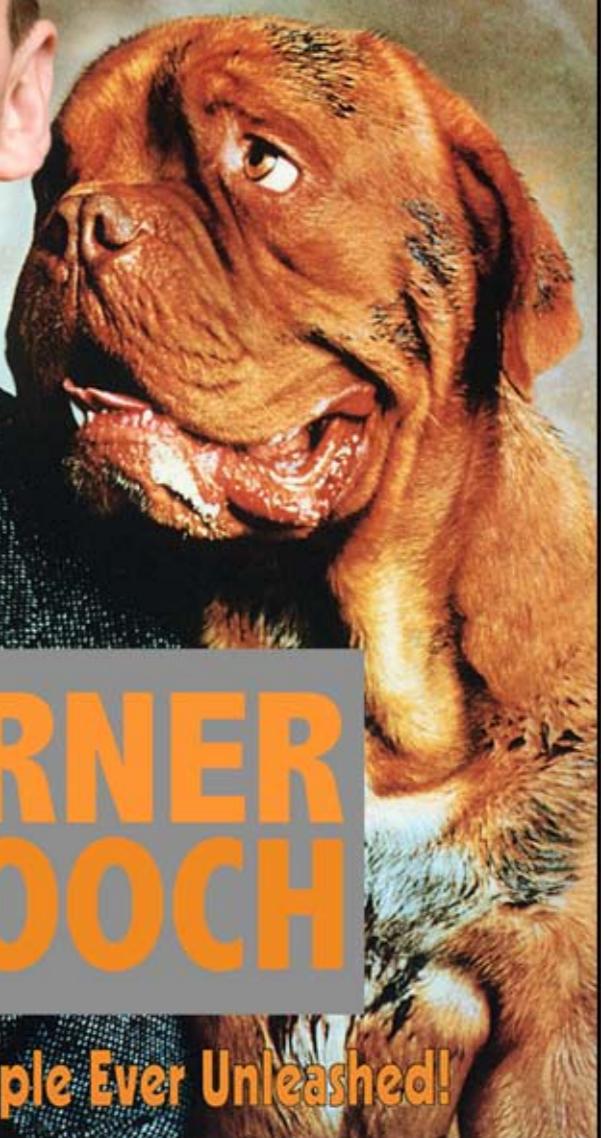


DAREN WARNER

Darren Warner IS
"DOWNRIGHT FUNNY!"
- New York Daily News

WARNER
& HOOCH

The Oddest Couple Ever Unleashed!



Torture by hot liquid... A recurring theme, as you'll see...









The Hit Parade!



With practice, the constructed images begin to contain more densely packed narrative and multiple references to that which the person holds closest.

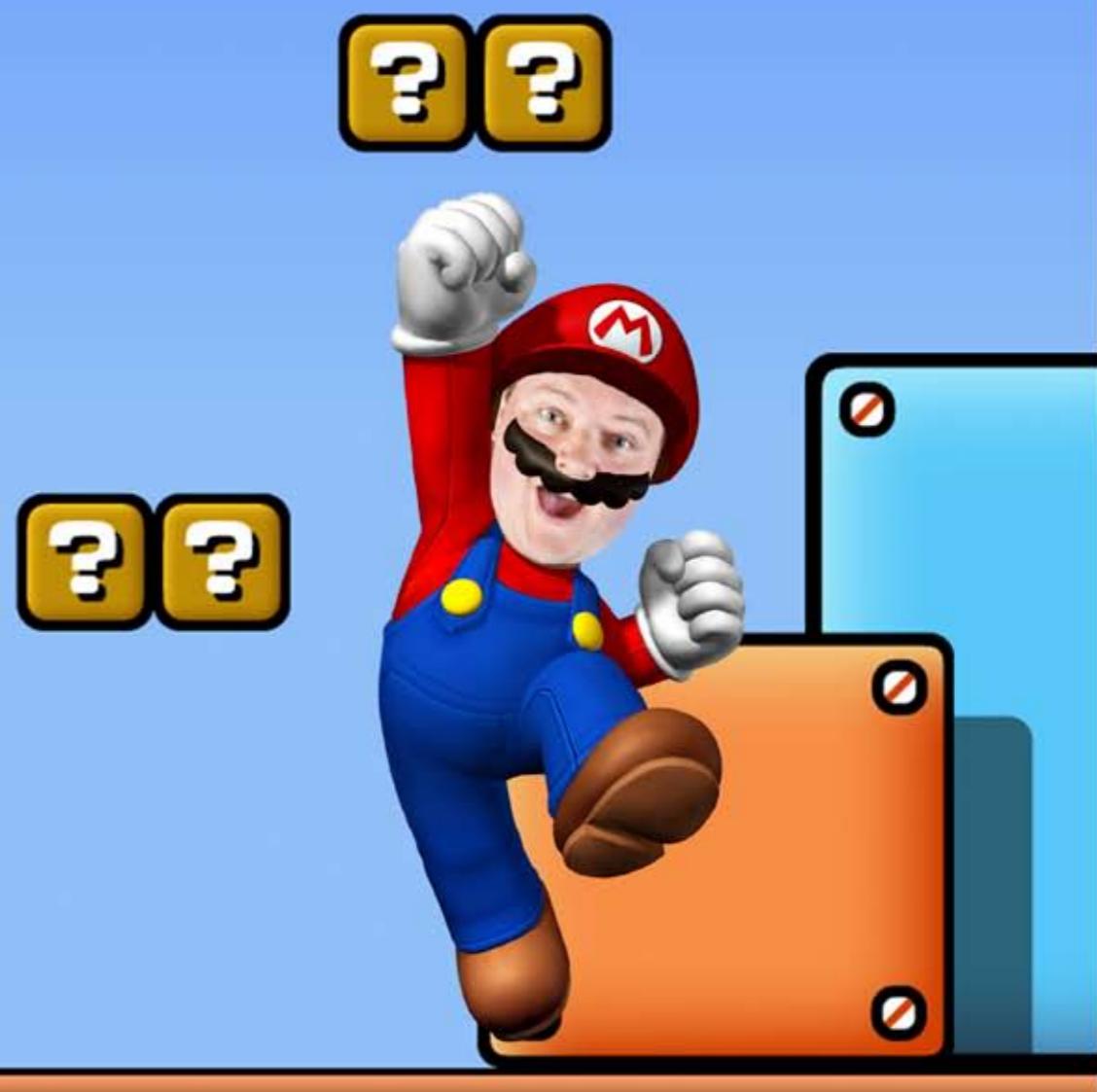




SONIC
THE HEDGEHOG

vs.

SUPER
DAVID WHIBLEY BROS.



Humour can be expressed in many ways... as can the inner personality of the image-maker.













**With special and warm thanks to
David, Daren and Nathan
without whose boundless enthusiasm and
creativity this work would not have been made.**

**Grateful thanks must also be afforded to the
Kent Autistic Trust for allowing me so much
freedom in the development of this project with
the people in their care.**